

# i magazine



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## 2001

i magazine is a student literary publication of  
Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner, Massachusetts



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## The Television Stares at Me

The television stares at me. A hungry box eating up my dreams. It is omnivorous, a mouth swallowing the strength of souls...beguiling us with ecstasy, delivering mediocrity.

How can such manure excite us? Oh, once in a while there's a sumptuous feast. But too often it's buried in soulless dust, beneath empty tales, beneath money-grubbers. All the while, feast or famine, the hunger gnaws. And so we stare. And the box stares back. Yes, the television stares at me. What do I do? I slap its face. I shut it off. And my soul is free for yet another day.

~Matthew Richardson



## Potatoes Mashed

The flip of *National Geographic* pages whipped my hair into my eyes. Blinking furiously, I got up to take a shower. *New Brunswick*, I thought dreamily to myself: *Nova Scotia*, while stepping into the hot water. *I'm going to go to Canada this summer*. While scrubbing my legs I noticed the hairs on them. The thought of shaving depressed me: I was feeling too relaxed in the hotness of the shower to do something so tedious.

To a steaming stroke of laziness, I sat down. I pulled my knees against my chest; water dumped off of my head and pulled stripes of red hair over my view. This is how it was for about ten minutes, until I lay down on my side against the flat surface, cupping a hand over my ear to keep the water from striking my eardrum. A tiny river rushed underneath the space between my ribs and hip. I was an arching seal or a small island in this way. This is how it was for about twenty minutes.

When I realized that I was about to fall asleep, I got up immediately. My head felt the tallness of being five feet higher than before and I thought I was about to tip over. Purple-black splotches appeared in front of me and my head felt as though it had been stuffed with *Fluffer Nutter*. I grabbed hold of the slimy shower curtain and as I leaned against it my hand slipped quickly down the rust-stained plastic. My face flew down as my legs bent like mashed potato. My head met the bath nozzle with a cracking noise that resonated through my nose and teeth, my perception of what eating chalk would be like.

My head bounced from the nozzle to the wall, then to the floor. There, blood, rich with *Fluffer Nutter* and mashed potatoes spilled over my hair. *New Brunswick* and *Nova Scotia* fell out too.

~Kelly Nye

## Stefka

The older we get, the easier it is to reflect upon the people in our lives who have made the greatest impact. Teachers, parents, friends and perhaps even siblings may affect our future decisions one way or another. For me this inspiration came from an unexpected source; my best friend's grandmother, Stefka. I didn't quite realize it then but gradually I understood how she had changed my way of thinking toward all fellow human beings, this woman of the Holocaust.

Her name was Stefka, which is Polish for Stephanie. She lived down the street from me while I was growing up but was born in Gdansk, Poland and came to this country in 1950. I met her when I was 10, and what does a 10-year-old know? I thought she was just another grandmother. I had one myself, back then. I did however think it strange that even during the hottest days of summer that she always wore long sleeve shirts.

I stopped in one afternoon to visit my friend but she wasn't home. Grammy Stef, as she was affectionately called, was rinsing out some hosiery in the kitchen sink. She had her sleeves rolled up and I could see a black smudge of some sort on her left arm, halfway between her elbow and her wrist. I walked closer and saw that the smudge was actually a series of numbers tattooed on her arm. She glared at me when she noticed I was transfixed on those numbers and she scared me. What was that look in her eyes? Was it anger? Shame? Hurt? I had never seen that look before. She snapped at me to leave and I hurriedly headed out. Before I could reach the door, she grabbed my arm and hugged me. She felt like a life-sized doll in my arms, almost void of life. When she lifted her head up, I could see a single tear in her eye and I knew that those numbers were to blame.

She asked me to stay and have tea with her, and immediately I felt older because in my home only the grownups ever drank tea. The story she told over tea was the most heart-tearing, beautiful story I've ever been told.

Stefka told me of her daily life in a concentration camp but was very secretive about how she arrived there. Even then, I somehow had the feeling that she had been betrayed. She only knew that it had been a swift departure and her parents, four brothers and two sisters were separated as soon as they arrived. She lamented how she never saw her parents or brothers again and not until liberation came did she know that her youngest sister had survived.

She learned very early that to remain alive in the camp one must be very obscure, as close to invisible as possible. If the guards could not see you they could not take you away. I also remembered how she talked about her bucket. "Your bucket was your life," she told me. You ate out of it, bathed in it and relieved yourself in it, and when someone died, his bucket was the first thing taken. She was held in the camp for

nearly three years until American and British soldiers came. During that time she saw many horrible things, most of which she wouldn't tell a ten-year-old. She did, however, tell me that through all of her pain and sorrow and anguish that she was one of the lucky ones. She was alive. She also made me believe her when she told me that she did not harbor any feelings of hatred. She did believe that Hitler and his highest officers were very evil and were punished justly for their deeds. Then, as she held my face in her hands, she said to me, "Feelings of hatred are like poison and will kill you almost as fast as a bullet to your heart. I know this. I have seen it happen."

Upon liberation, she returned home to Poland, only to find that she had no home left. She made it to the United States with the aid of the few family and friends that remained. She married a man from the Ukraine and raised a large family, living with her oldest daughter after her husband passed away. We had many more teas together, but never once mentioned her life in the camps. I felt very privileged that she had shared that part of her life with me at all, even more so the older I got. I named my daughter Stephanie after Grammy Stefka and even though she left this world many years ago, Grammy Stefka will always live in my memory. I sometimes see her face when I sit down for a cup of tea.

~Cynthia Durand

### Working on my Book

I'm not writing a classic. It's not a masterpiece. I'm only doing what I should be doing. I'm working on my book.

Reality is agony. Reality is dull. Fantasy forbids a wasteland. I'd rather listen to other voices, visit other worlds. How? I'm working on my book.

Thoughts come to me. Here and there. Now and then. Often when I least expect them. I need to know what my characters do. The fate of the world—their world—means so much to me. I sit down. I write. It takes a very, very long time. Write. Rewrite. Refine. Revise. Remind oneself to remember the little things, the touching traits I know must fuel my work. My work is working on my book.

In the end, the book is done. Or I set it aside. I must. There is only so much I can do. Beyond that, revision is death and resurrection. And so...it is over. A voice demands to be heard. A new book is waiting to be born. Perhaps it continues the previous book. Perhaps it is a new work altogether. But work is work. I love my work. Work is...working on my book.

~Matthew Richardson

## Rhapsody for Wednesdays

Will you lay me down,  
On cotton coated bed,  
Arms wrapped around my waist,  
soft pillow for my head?

Will you whisper softly,  
Those words I love to hear,  
and tell me that you love me,  
and how you hold me dear?

Will you feel our bodies  
pressed firmly into one,  
yoking us together,  
until sweet morning comes?

Will my hair spread all around you,  
dark eyes clasp to your soul?  
Will I tightly cloak your fullness,  
while inside me love unfolds?

Will we take to slumber  
on cotton coated bed?  
We'll spoon against each other,  
as dreams romp through our heads.

~Melanie Davis



## Stand Here and Die

I stand here behind the counter. I cannot move. Something in me is paralyzed. I've been thinking a lot lately. I've been thinking about my position in life and saying "I stand here behind the counter" is not only the physical description of what I am doing in this moment, but an assessment of my own position.

And while I am certainly here standing, leaning forward with my arms propping me up against the counter, it is nothing but clear to me that my more ethereal half has fallen down long ago and has been knocked unconscious on the floor behind me. When I was younger, there was a strong sense of optimism. I didn't worry if what I was doing at the time seemed pointless or just plain f---d up, because I was reinforced by a mechanism within me which relentlessly told me that it was okay, and that I had time. I was young, and I was supposed to do stupid pointless things because there would be no other time for it in my life.

It seems to me that this was an opiate of self-defeat which I unconsciously used to gas myself into the same dull-eyed, lower-middle-class stupor that has condemned so many of those before me who have recognized it too late. And I wonder: have I too recognized it too late?

So what am I doing here? I stand here behind the counter, exchanging cliched greetings and salutations with people I don't know, don't like, don't care about. I push buttons, wear my light blue uniform, and try not to show any trace of humanity so as not to break the pleasant illusion of happy public service. And all for a less than two-hundred dollar paycheck, so that I can pay to live in an apartment not infested by any kind of pest, a phone to let everyone know I'm still alive now and then, and still have money left over for a six pack now and then. It is a game that has kept me pacified for some time.

This has fallen away. My uniform is dirty, stained. The face which used to bear a smile, or at least a pleasant composition of facial expression, has now been beaten down into a frown.

I can't help but feel that at some point I lost control. I give myself credit at least for recognizing it, but I know it's going to take more than that. At some point I will have to just start caring again and getting it done.

Maybe I'm imagining all this. Maybe I'm just unconsciously being brought down by a little premature male pattern baldness. Maybe I just listen to too much Waits and too much Cash and surround myself in too much depressing culture in general, but it seems the only truth I can find is in depression. I just know I can't leave it alone. I know that I can't just exhale and fall asleep and forget this desperation I feel, because it will spring back and consume me in a few years if I ignore it. I also know that I have no idea where to begin.

~Michael Talarico

## As Darkness Falls

It had been quite a month. For several weeks the entire Multiverse had been without a great deal of the technology it had come to depend on. Some kind of wave had swept through every universe and rendered most technological devices utterly useless, bringing the once mighty interstellar super powers to their very knees. That is, until today. Today most everything came back to life and worked as efficiently as things had normally done, and for that most everyone was grateful, though most everyone would probably begin taking technology for granted again in another couple of months or so.

To make sure that the rebuilding and reassessment of their star fleet went smoothly, the great Senate of the Weirdonian Imperial Conglomerate, one of those mighty interstellar super powers, which was made up of nearly three thousand Senators representing their sovereign nations, had decided to send one of their own, the influential Senator Greshn of the Mution Empire to the orbital space dock that encircled the WIC's capital world like a great, gold ring. Greshn had always been a well liked individual and though his age had begun to show, he was the first to volunteer to go to the orbital space dock to oversee the repairs, at least until their fleet Admiral, Degnomogh Vog'Stragho, had returned from his latest mission.

After the Senate's daily sessions had ended, Greshn and his senatorial aides exited the immense senate dome and began to head for home. Greshn's aides smiled and waved as the trio broke up and went their separate ways for the night. The light of the third sun had begun to dim as it set in the east. Greshn's senior aide, a fellow by the name of Rehvek Leshatt, began his normal walk home down the southern avenue through the great garden that surrounded the Senate Dome. As Rehvek walked, a chill went through him, causing him to stop and bundle his robes a bit before he resumed his walk. And then, a man stepped from the shadows of the trees and bushes and into the light of a nearby lamppost. Rehvek recognized him, nodded his head and the man nodded in acknowledgement.

Corruption is a funny thing, it never really happens all at once like a bolt of lightning, it happens more like a tide that slowly envelops you until you find yourself waist deep in it. Rehvek could be rather a cruel individual, as a child he found sick pleasure in killing small forest creatures, a pastime Rehvek had still not grown out of. But as an adult, Rehvek has set his sights a bit higher than rodents; he wanted to become a Senator and to wield the power that came with it. But he had found that he could get just so far by kissing the posteriors of those above him, to get what he wanted he would need some help of the clandestine and rather dark kind. He had secretly contacted individuals associated with the Abolitionists, a right wing religious organization that saw it as their

duty to abolish the Senate and institute their own fascist government. He knew that this game he was playing was indeed dangerous, but he went ahead anyway. Rehvek was getting what he wanted; he had become the senior aid and advisor to one of the most influential senators in the entire government. The Abolitionists asked little of him, at first. In the beginning they only wanted tidbits of classified information, none of which seemed connected to one another. But since Rehvek did not want to upset his under the table benefactors, he never pressed the matter.

Rehvek and the other man made their way to an out of the way part of the garden and sat opposite each other on a couple of benches. The other man didn't seem out of place nor overly conspicuous; he was clad in dark green business robes with white trim. This was Rehvek's contact, who insisted on being called Mr. Green. For a few moments the two men simply stared at each other, and then the other man said something, not through words though. They communicated via telepathy, a trait common among all of their species.

*"You have been of great service to us,"* Mr. Green began the conversation.

*"Well, I do what I can. You know, for the cause,"* Rehvek replied.

*"Indeed,"* Mr. Green said coldly.

Rehvek had never bothered to ask Mr. Green what his real name was, largely due to the fact that Mr. Green probably wouldn't tell him anyway. But still, it was rather fascinating to Rehvek, he also got a kick out of being a kind of undercover agent. Generally, Mr. Green was never a happy sort of individual during their meetings; however, this night seemed different, and Mr. Green seemed a bit on edge.

*"We need more of you, Rehvek. Much more."*

*"All right, what is it you need of me?"* inquired Rehvek.

*"We need you to help us out on a little... project. One that will make you a Senator."*

Rehvek's curiosity piqued. All his dreams, all he had done. He would finally get what he deserved. *"What do you need me to do?"* Rehvek asked excitedly.

*"We want you to kill Senator Greshn."*

*"What? Now, wait a minute, I never signed up for-!"* Rehvek was stunned.

*"This is a holy war, Rehvek! Or have you forgotten that? If you are of such weak character, I'm sure my associates and I can find someone more worthy."*

Rehvek's mind began to race. He had never expected that he'd ever be asked to kill... or so that's what he kept telling himself. However, the reality was that deep down he knew that he should never have gotten involved with the Abolitionists. His dreams of a bright future for himself blinded him to the dark path he was on. And now it was too late. If he pulled out of the deal now, the Abolitionists would surely kill him before he could warn anyone of their plans. Rehvek, although having no



great respect for the Senator under which he served, was terrified at the concept of actually taking someone's life. But his hunger for power was too great. *"How... How can I kill Senator Greshn?"*

Mr. Green cracked a devious and satisfied smile, he knew Rehvek's lust for power would overrule what little moral fiber he had. Rehvek didn't know it, but the Abolitionists were forging him into what they needed. Through him, the Abolitionists could move on the entire Senate. Those who would not turn could be kept in line through fear.

*"That's the easy part. Greshn is leaving for a short trip to the orbital space dock tomorrow, correct?"*

*"Yes".*

*"After our meeting tonight, go directly to Greshn's senatorial shuttle. Once at the launch pad, you'll find a small satchel behind a nearby fence. Inside you'll find a fake pass card that will grant you access to the shuttle, you'll also find an explosive charge. Once inside, you'll have to work fast. Go to the back and open the access port to the shuttle's power source. Plant the device right on the reactor; it has a built-in cloaking device, once you've planted it, it will activate and disappear. Leave the scene quickly and return to your apartment, then, all we'll have to do is wait for the morning."*

Rehvek almost sighed in relief, he thought they were going to have him kill Greshn in some less discreet manor, like a knife to the back or something of that nature. But still, he knew he would be responsible for taking a life. *"Is that all?"* Rehvek exclaimed.

*"That's all. Sounds easy doesn't it?"*

*"Yeah,"* Rehvek said, still a little weary.

*"It's just that easy. Now, get to it."* Mr. Green rose from his bench and actually spoke in words to Rehvek for the first time since they met.

*"Good night...Senator Rehvek."* After a slight bow of respect to Rehvek's impending promotion, Mr. Green walked off.

Rehvek sat there for what seemed like hours, although it was actually only a few minutes. He went over it and over it in his head. Could he bring himself to kill someone? Someone who trusted him, someone who, unbeknownst to Rehvek, thought of him as an adopted son? Rehvek rose from his bench on shaky legs and began his walk to the senatorial shuttle launch pads. The suns had set hours ago and it was quite dark as Rehvek found the satchel behind the fence. He went into the shuttle using the fake pass card, then he went to the back of the shuttle, removed the panel and placed the device on the reactor core. A moment later it cloaked and was set to go off tomorrow soon after the Senator had taken off.



For an hour, Rehvek wandered the streets of the capital city. He was worried. Worried that he would get caught, that he would be exposed for the contemptible person he had become. He hoped, deep down, that they would find the bomb, that Greshn would be all right and that the Abolitionists would have lost interest in him. But he was just deluding himself; tomorrow he would be a murderer and a traitor to the people he professes to serve.

The next morning came and Rehvek was walking alongside Greshn on his way to his shuttle. Greshn turned to Rehvek.

"You know, Rehvek, you're one of the few people that I trust implicitly, besides my family, of course. There are dark forces out there, and I'm glad that I have a friend and colleague such as you."

It was almost more than Rehvek could take, his guilt began to eat away at his soul like acid. "I... I've come to know you as a good friend too, Senator."

Greshn laughed. "Oh, please, please, just Greshn, we've known each other for over a year now, we can dispose of such formalities when we're just talking with each other."

"All right," Rehvek forced a smile, inside his soul was dying, and deep down he knew it.

"Rehvek? Well, I was going to wait till I got back, but I think I'll tell you now."

"What?"

"I'm getting old Rehvek. I've been a Senator for years now, and quite frankly, I'm growing weary of it. I just can't do the things I used to, and the things I still can do I'd like to be able to enjoy. And so, I'll be retiring in a few weeks, and with the good job you've done as my aid, I'm sure you'll be elected as the new Mutionian Senator."

Rehvek forced a smile, but said nothing. What could he say? He could warn him, there was still time he thought. But if he told him, he would be a disgrace, especially to Greshn. And now to find out all he'd done would have been for nothing.

Greshn boarded his shuttle and Rehvek's heart was racing. *What the hell are you doing?* A little voice from deep within him screamed. *You can still save him! Damn your cowardice! Accept the consequences of your actions!* The shuttle lifted off and Rehvek stamped that little voice down into his soul because it was something he didn't want to hear. Rehvek tried with all his might to stamp that little voice into oblivion, and then the shuttle's explosion ripped through the air. The bystanders around Rehvek gasped in disbelief, and so did Rehvek. *How could I have let this happen?!* Rehvek thought. But it was too late, and something deep inside him died a little and that voice of conscience within him became faint. From this instant forward, he would never be the same. He would become the catalyst that would eventually bring civil war raining down upon the heads of those he claimed to serve.

## The Gift

With each passing moment I became more anxious than the last. "How much longer?" I asked, turning towards my father who was resting his head back against the seat, eyes closed trying to catch up on some of the lost sleep he missed by getting up at 6 a.m. to take this trip.

"Almost there. Have patience," he replied without even a twitch of his still closed eyes. "Almost there," he repeated. "Just a few more miles down the road."

Disappointed that I had received the same answer for the previous twenty minutes, I turned my attention back towards the movie playing on the monitor two window seats in front of me. "*Is this heaven?*"... "*No, It's Iowa!*" shouted back Ray Kinsella, "*I could of sworn it was heaven.*" With that the young ballplayer turned and began to walk towards the cornstalks and that was when Ray spoke up, said something that had been building up inside of him for the longest time. "*Uhhh, dad? You wanna have a catch?*" Tears formed in the young man's eyes, "*Yes, I would like that.*" At this line I turned to look at my dad who by now was fast asleep. His heavy breathing, almost snore-like, kept perfect harmony with the humming of the bus. I couldn't believe we were finally going! I had wanted to go since I was eight years old when I heard of the town called Cooperstown. He kept his promise though and said he would take me after graduation and here we are.

Looking around the bus at the other the others also playing the waiting game, I noticed an age and racially diverse group. Another father with what I can imagine his three young children, all wearing Red Sox caps. Probably between the ages of eight and fourteen, too young to remember, but old enough to understand and learn. In stereo from all three you heard, "Daddy, How much longerrrrr?" "Almost there, guys. Don't you worry." A couple of older gentlemen were talking about old time baseball. Listening to their words, I could hear a range of topics in their conversation, from the Brooklyn Dodgers, to Ebbets Field, to Ted Williams, to even Phil Rizzuto. I know I shouldn't have been eavesdropping but it was baseball and I couldn't help it. Their stories were everything from real life experiences to hope and dreams of a young schoolboy wanting to grow up and play center field at Fenway next to Teddy "ballgame" Williams in left or even leg out an infield grounder against Sandy Koufax.

"Ya know, trying to hit Koufax was like trying to drink coffee with a fork," one replied to the other. These were just a couple of examples of the many tales that were told over the three-hour ride. Some were serious, and often painted with a humorous brush, all of which made you proud to be a baseball fan.

Just then the voice of the tour guide crept over the P.A system on the bus, shaking me back to my senses from my trip into my imagination.

" Ladies and gentlemen, we have just entered the town of Cooperstown, New York. We will be arriving at the Baseball Hall of Fame in precisely five minutes. Thank you."

My pop woke up, looked at me, and asked in a groggy, morning voice, "What'd he say? How much longer?"

With a smile on my face I turned towards him and sarcastically said, " Well, welcome back, sleepyhead. You missed the entire trip. We are going home now."

" Ohh, really? Hmm, well, I guess I just wasted three hours of my life on a bus to New York for nothing then, huh?"

Sharing a laugh we turned to look out the window at the town that had three major attractions: corn, Doubleday Field, and the Baseball Hall of Fame. When you have that kind of company, corn never looked so good.

~Michael LeClair

## Forever

She has always been there in mind, body, and spirit. She has been the only stable, constant love that I have ever had beyond my mother and father. She has always listened to me when I needed someone to listen. She has always spoken when I have no words. And when there is nothing to be said, we can read each other. There is a connection.

Nothing, or no one could ever break us apart. There is nothing that can come between us. People have tried many times to come between us. People that both of us care about. People that we don't ever want to loose. But, together we are strong. We are one... And we hold on.

Neither one of us is perfect, nor will we ever be. We don't have all that wonderful of a relationship at times. We get on each other's nerves. We aggravate each other. Once we were so angry that somehow, by some means, we each managed to make a light bulb explode in our rooms on the very same night. There is a connection.

Still, even though there have been nights spent yelling coldly into one another's faces, we love each other dearly. We can fix things, just as we can replace a light bulb that has burned out. Our patience will be burned out, but only for a short time. Soon it will be renewed.

If the world was mine I would give it all to her. If I could control the weather she would wake everyday to the sun shining brilliantly through an open window. Every cloud would be hers to dance on, fly through, or simply grace with her presence. There is no one on earth like her, there is no one to take her place. There is no one to tell those secrets to, and know that you can trust. There would be no one to call my best friend, my companion, my buddy, my pal. Whatever you call her, she is mine.

We don't know exactly who we are yet, or what we will be, or where we will end up. All we know is that we were meant to be. We wouldn't have come this far if we weren't. We know that we will always be together, whether in mind, body, or spirit... this life or the next, we will be together - BEST FRIENDS FOREVER.

-Greta Wilkinson



## It Happened Every Time

All she could manage was a bleak "I'm sorry."

He stared at her as if to say "That's it?" But that was it. No more could be said or done. It had been finished long ago.

He picked up his bag and made his way to the door. He stopped and turned to her and she could read so much in his eyes. She looked away unable to bear his expression. They had already done this too many times.

"You know I love you," he said.

She stared at him in silence. She knew. She loved him too, but sometimes love just isn't enough. Sometimes you need so much more than that. He put his bag down on the floor and stood in front of her. She knew what was coming next. It happened every time. Every time they fought like this. Only they weren't fighting anymore. When you fight you do it to hold onto something. They were letting go.

"Please don't do this," she said. "I can't take it anymore. We aren't making things any easier by holding on. Just let go. Please, just let it go!" She knew that all the pleading in the world wouldn't stop him from doing what he would do next. He did it every time and he was always so predictable.

He reached out and put his arms around her. She let him because this is what happened every time. He held her but she did not hold him back. She felt his breath on her neck and his heart beat against her chest. This was enough. She was going to lose it if they kept doing this. She pulled away.

"Time for you to go now."

He looked at her as if to say You really mean it this time don't you. She opened the door wide and waited for him to pick up his bag and leave. She knew he wouldn't because that was what happened every time.

But something was different. Maybe it was the look in his eyes or the way he leaned over to grab his bag. Whatever it was she did not know. All she knew was that he grabbed his bag and left, shutting the door behind him.

Just like that. That never happened.

She wanted to scream. She wanted him back. This couldn't be happening. He would never do this because it wasn't like him. It just wasn't like him. She started to cry. Suddenly she stopped. This is what she wanted and what they both needed. Why was she crying? She was free. They would never go through that pain again. She should be happy, but for some reason she wasn't. She felt awful. Maybe it was because that had never happened before.

## Heaven (A farce in half an act)

*Frank is standing in front of a stand in a dark smoke-filled room.*

Frank: What am I doing here? Who are you? Am I dead or something?

Gateman: Let me ask you something. How often do you come across people with big white wings in a giant dark yet bright and foggy area?

Frank: I knew that it was fall, but you mean that it's Halloween already? That was fast.

Gateman: No, you're dead.

Frank: Well, that explains some things. Man, I thought I was tripping. That's a relief.

Gateman: A relief? You're dead!

Frank: Oh yeah, that's a bad thing too, isn't it?

Gateman: Man, you're really something, aren't you?

Frank: Nah, c'mon, I'm just playing.

Gateman: You're playing with heaven? Who do you think you are?

Frank: Hey, what do you expect from someone who just walked into their friend's house, and then materialized in some ominous area with the news flash of "You're dead"? The denial response should be common for you to see.

Gateman: It's understandable. Now, should we continue?

Frank: Sure, whatever.

Gateman: Well aren't you anxious about whether you're getting into heaven?

Frank: Sure I am, but I guess it can wait, for I'm not exactly going anywhere.

Gateman: True. Now, what's your name?

Frank: Frank Pettetti.

Gateman: Frank Pettetti...Frank Pettetti...Huh, strange, we don't have you on file?

Frank: What? Heaven doesn't have me on file? Does this mean that I'm not dead?

Gateman: No, it means that technically, you weren't ever meant to exist right now.

Frank: What? Oh my god! Does this mean that my ex-wife was a messenger from heaven when she told me that I should just disappear from the face of the earth? Man, I thought she was just a stuck up bitch.

Gateman: No, she was just a stuck up bitch. Here's her file if you want to

take a look.

Frank: Sure.

Gateman: No, I'm just kidding. Our database is right now doing a complete check for your name. Maybe you were a soul that was accidentally reincarnated, or someone from the future.

Frank: You mean heaven has so much information that it's own information systems run slower than a magnetized snail on a treadmill? Kinda like a slow computer, huh?

Gateman: Well you try to process through fourteen trillion souls.

Frank: Hey, y'know, that system does look a lot like that Dell that my best friend Bob has. Hey, he was the one I was visiting now that I think about it.

Gateman: Uh, no, it's not a Dell, it's a heaven computer. Runs on solid soul chips I guess you could say.

Frank: Cool.

Gateman: Well, here we go, nothing.

Frank: So now what?

Gateman: You're gonna have to see God about this.

Frank: Are you serious? Well, where is he?

Gateman: Well, you see that bright light far, far off in the sky behind me?

Frank: ...Yeah.

Gateman: That's where he is.

Frank: Man, all that way?

Gateman: Oh that's okay, you can use our Omnipotent Teleportation Service and be there faster than a nerd's upset scream after a wedgie.

Frank: Uh, sure, I'll do that teleportation thing.

*All goes dark*

Frank: Hello? Hey!

*Frank hears a small bumping behind him*

Frank: Huh? What was that?

*The lights come back up, where there's a strange dark man in front of Frank*

Stranger: Hello, my son.

Frank: Who are you?

Stranger: I am God.

Frank: What, a skinny little white dude with muscles too small to beat up a spineless cactus is God? Yeah right!

Stranger: Well, I'm not actually God, but I am...

Frank: God's personal lawyer? Good, I'd like to file a complaint about

your heaven place. I have found my experience to be most unsatisfactory so far.

Stranger: ...No, I'm not God's lawyer, I am a representation of God for the moment. I know just that you would more easily listen to me in the shape of a man rather than a giant blinding light.

Frank: Well, that works, Mr. Almighty. Now, you gonna help me with my file?

Stranger: What seems to be the problem with it?

Frank: Well, how do I put it? Supposedly there is no actual problem because the file has to exist before it can have a problem. You have to help me find it somewhere, I haven't been this upset since I bought front row tickets to go see Aerosmith, and they turned out to be for N'Sync.

Stranger: Okay, I'll get straight to it.

Frank: Hurry up, will you? I mean, do you know what it's like to be against existence itself? To be against God's will? Hey, "Default In Heaven", "Against Existence," "Against God's Will," those sound like awesome movies or cool rock group titles.

Stranger: Silence, my son. I am searching throughout all the lost souls.

Frank: Just hurry it up, okay man? Jeez, I thought that God would work a bit faster!

Stranger: You mock me? Y'know, maybe your file is in Hell.

Frank: In Hell? That's not funny man, I should kick your ass.

Stranger: You wanna take me, God, on? All right, we'll do some Kung-Fu fighting. After all, I love Jackie Chan!

Frank: Okay, sounds good to me!

*The two start to fight. Frank wins rather easily*

Frank: Wow, God, you ain't so big after all! Huh, now I can say that not only did I talk to God, but I kicked his ass too!

Stranger: Jeez, Frank, it's only me, Bob!

Frank: Bob? Huh, I knew it was you!

Stranger: Yeah right, you SO fell for it.

Frank: So, how did you do this so well? And, who was that guy back there?

Stranger: Oh, I'm having my furniture moved and new furniture put in. That guy's just a furniture mover.

Gateman: Hey, Mr. Neman, you want us to get the furniture in here now?

Stranger: Sure sure, and turn off that smoke maker too.



Gateman: Right.

Frank: Wow, that's what I call service.

Stranger: Yeah, now you wanna go out to Chub's Bar and pick up some girls?

Frank: Yeah, it sounds okay, but personally I was hoping we could do something different today; something a bit more interesting.

~Jonathan Kosenko

## The Beach

The beach is empty now, and only a few listless souls wander, picking up trash. The sun is setting fast, and the squawk of the seagulls alone mars the calming, gentle hiss of the waves. The gulls dart to and fro, getting caught by the wind from time to time and sent off in new and unpredictable directions.

They fight that wind, but the best they can do is remain stationary, eventually giving up the struggle and returning, disenchanted, to earth, to the same foodless spot from which they tried to ascend.

A few seem full, and they drift out onto the ocean, floating atop the waves, distancing themselves from the shore. They are better, they think, than the ones left behind to fight for crumbs in the sand. But they forget, as we all do, that they will probably be rejoining them eventually, when they get hungry again.

Meanwhile, the surf roars on in its calm, quiet-but-still-threatening kind of way. Its waves are small, and move slowly up the beach, but they tell the tale of stormier times, and warn of more yet to come. The cutthroat gulls respect the sea as provider and home and friend and killer. They wrap themselves in it, bobbing peacefully out in the waves, then recoil from its touch, fighting their way through the winds back to the rocks and sand, back to reality, hoping to find bits of food on a torn piece of picnic blanket.

Sometimes, you can see them far, far inland. Scavenging, circling parking lots, ravenously fighting each other aside for scraps thrown away from fast-food restaurants. Did the beach run out of food, and they just went on? Or did the wind just carry them here, while they fought it all the way?

Hope it carries them back. Hope it carries us all back.

~Nathan Jones

## St. Vincent's

I wonder if I'll ever find St. Vincent's Hospital. I think I went there when my sister was born, but that was 16 years ago. Maybe I went there when my uncle or grandfather died. I'm not sure. All hospitals are the same to me, giant mazes of death and decay. Every time I enter those buildings my heart beats faster and I want to run away. But Danny is with me so maybe I'll be able to handle it more easily..

I am speeding down rout 190 because I am not sure if there are visiting hours and it is almost nine o'clock. I hope I don't get pulled over. Not that it really matters much, I always get off. I've been pulled over around twenty times, and only paid one ticket. My Dad always tells me I'm a lucky bastard, and that he wishes I'd have to pay them so I will learn a lesson.

So I keep a watchful eye on the road and traffic for any signs of the cops. My mom gave me some directions, but all I remember is the Vernon Street exit part. Oh, well. I'll find it. As I turn a few times, I see some strikers with those dumb sandwich boards. I heard something about this on the radio and know that I have found St. Vincent's Hospital. It is pretty familiar now, and I drive to the building where my grandfather died.

Danny and I enter the five-story building: it smells terrible. With the lack of nursing staff on site, the patients probably have not been getting the best care. In every room I see old people with all kinds of machines. Most of them look dead already. My mom said it was on the fifth floor so I get in the elevator. I catch my breath and get ready for the upcoming encounter. The nurses' station is right outside of the elevator. I ask the nurse what room Mary McCarthy is in.

"Um, hold on one moment, I'll check, Hon," she says with a southern accent. I heard that the hospital was calling out of state help, mostly from Alabama.

"Thanks a lot." A few minutes later, the nurse asks me if I'm sure that my grandmother is here. I'm not in the mood for this. After a small discussion concerning my grandmother's condition I find out that she is probably in the other building.

As I find my way out, I hear some old man moan, and it reminds me how much I hate hospitals. The buildings are separated with a tall, chain-link fence. The easiest way there, in my mind, is over the fence; plus, that offers a little adventure. So over we go. As we turn the corner of the hospital an officer greets us.

"Hey, what are you guys doing here?"

"Visiting my grandmother. She's in the hospital. See you later." He is probably just looking for something to do. That is so irritating. Actually, all cops are irritating, they always seem to be on a power trip. We find a door and go in. The elevator is right there and as we get on a cop down the hall notices us. He starts yelling out questions. I put my hand to my ear and start repeating "What's that? What's that?" Dan closes the door

door and pushes the button for the fifth floor. This is not like the other building, there are machines and wheelchairs everywhere. Nurses rush around; they are too busy to help me, and I wouldn't want to slow their progress anyway. We creep around corners and look in open rooms.

"Hey, Rob," a familiar voice says.

Good, my mom found me. I was starting to get scared. She shows Dan the waiting room and warns me that her mother is pretty bad. They are getting ready to put her on a morphine drip right now and if I want to talk to her I had better do so quickly. As I enter the room the nurse is pulling a tube out of my grandmother's throat. She wrenches in pain and makes a gurgling sound. Her lungs are so full of liquid, every breath seems to be her last. Two of my cousins, a couple of aunts and two uncles are there. My cousin Steve is twenty-four and always acted like my big brother when I was younger.

"Man, you're a giant!" he says.

"I haven't grown in two years," I say. That brings a chuckle from the family. I am one of the largest of my family so I get that type of comment often. Steve's younger brother Tommy starts telling me about this new ska/punk band he is in. I hate ska, but I tell him to give me a call when his band has a show. I am always supportive of anyone who wants to dig a little deeper than WAAF or 94.5 for music. My mom hints to me that I should go say something to my grandmother.

I walk up to the bed, and look at her. She looks dead already. I feel like I am on a stage with my family watching me. I think they are expecting me to say something great or inspirational.

"Hi, Nanny."

She opens her eyes a bit and the blue seems just as bright as ever. I hold her hand and she squeezes it a little; it is probably all the strength she has. I can feel myself shaking. I kiss her on the cheek and tell her I love her. She squeezes again. I see her rosary beads around her neck and I am happy. She has lived a full, long life, and now it is time to go.

"See you later, Nanny," I say after a while. The whole hospital thing has gotten to me and I have to get outside.

Outside, the pickets are marching around. I don't feel like climbing fences right now, so we take the lone way to the car. Some sandwich board ladies are walking toward us. I just walk straight into them and one of them mumbles a crass word under her breath.

"Maybe I am, but you left your duties and don't even care that my Nanny is going to die. So who's the bigger...?"

"Ahh, forget it."

~Rob Connor



## Gone Awhile

He's been gone awhile. Leaves, shaken free by the crisp wind, begin to cloak the overgrown grass. A rusted mower sits idle, in need of repair. The stony driveway, pitted deeper with each rainstorm, is now a hazard to any shock system that dares to brave the climb.

The house is white but worn into bare wood in most places. A single, freshly painted exterior wall is a token of a job begun, now an abandoned undertaking. Missing panes expose the barn to the elements, heat and cold, rain and snow. The house's main door creaks open, welcoming any visitor, who, upon entering, might wonder what to expect, with the exterior being as it is and all.

The essence of home cooking wafts from stove to nostrils. Amidst the clang of pots and pans, Oldies ring about from both radio and cook alike. A caramel candle flickers, fooling the senses to expect a sweetened last course. The scent of supper and the sweet candlelight would surely beckon him to toss his coat on the chair and grab a hot cup of fresh hazelnut. But he doesn't, for he's not home and hasn't been for awhile.

The meal is nibbled on and the leftovers packed in Tupperware for another night or for the garbage bin in a week or so. She lingers in the warm kitchen with her coffee and daily newspaper, the dishes get forgotten, along with the sink and stove. The peeling walls and cracking tiles, the hanging wires and chipping woodwork, all waiting for a worker, cannot escape her wandering eyes. But the worker's not there, just the kitchen help.

The hot shower washes away the toil of the day. The bathroom's clean with lacy curtains and meadow freshener. Stepping out, she quickly realizes that the floor, though shiny, gets soggier with rot by the day. Too much pressure will surely break through the deceptively shiny surface. It's the foundation that needs replacing but new foundations are costly, especially the longer one waits. Tending to the problem sooner—before the point of crumbling joints and moisture-laden floorboards—could have salvaged the structure. Now, too late for small repair, ripping out and starting from scratch will be required. She hopes it'll hold just another day, or month, or perhaps even the year. With her makeup now removed, her weariness is hidden behind the steamy mirror.

The towels are hung; then the blankets are turned. A few pages are read; she turns out the light. A dim nightlight remains in the empty kitchen. Alas, the day is done. Daunting dreams frequently interrupt her fitful slumber. Time and time again she tosses and turns. Awakened by the creaking door and sandy boots scraping the kitchen tile, she feigns deep rest. The boots thud to the floor. A coat rumples on the chair. With

the dim nightlight leading the way, he treads toward the bedroom. He's home, but not really, and he hasn't been in a while.

~Carlene Breen

## Grainy Gray and Barbed Wire

Grainy gray and barbed wire. That's what I remember. The graininess is in the black-and-white film, with the scratches, blurs and warps that that entails. The barbed wire is in the image itself, a mishmash of intersecting spikes, holding those ragged faces in.

Ragged faces. Bodies swathed in rags. That's what I remember. Skulls and skin have merged into one. Black, soulless, shrunken eyes stare out at me from behind the wire. Their bodies are gangly skeletons, bending and breaking in the wind. I see an arm, a protrusion of bone and blotchy skin. The rags slip. A tattoo becomes visible.

A for Auschwitz. D for Dachau. That's what I remember. Helpless people. Not even people anymore. Things. Playthings. Slave labor at best. Vermin with a human shape at worst. That's what they say. *They*. They...inviting their victims through a portal into hell. And I ask myself...how could this have happened? How could we *let* this happen? How could human beings *willingly* let this happen?

*How could this happen?* I asked myself. That's what I remember. That's what I remember most of all. The disbelief. The inability to accept. But I must accept. It happened. I know it did. Everything inside us says it *couldn't* happen, *didn't* happen. But it *did* happen. And no amount of denial can ever change it. And then I stop to think...some of the killers are still out there, walking the streets, living in terror, always one step ahead of those who hunt them down. But...they do live. And there is nothing I can do to change it.

*What can I do?* I ask myself. I can remember. And perhaps if we remember, if we all remember, such madness won't consume us again.

~Matthew Richardson

## Her First Flight

She pushed and shoved her way through the loud volume of people covering the airport's floor. She had never traveled alone before. She handed over her airplane ticket, and slowly walked her way down the confining narrow pathway to the plane. She was greeted by an attendant's smile, returned it, and confidently carried her leopard print bags past some black suits and down the aisle to find her small seat in coach.

She took her seat, tugged her black skirt down toward her knees, and watched as people filed into the plane. In the seat in front of her, a lively little boy sat backwards, moved his cherub face toward her, boldly said hello, then turned around with an amiable fit of laughter. An older woman smiled, her bright pink lips excusing her way past her, taking the window seat beside her. The woman's freckled, wrinkled hands reached into her yellow straw bag, pulled two long needles out and began to finish making, as she had proudly told her, a blanket for her daughter's newborn. As she looked around, wondering who, if anyone, would take the empty seat beside her, she caught a pair of gentle blue eyes gazing into hers. He looked away, and she shyly reached for her black leather pocketbook to look for a stick of gum. Seconds later, he walked up to her, taking the empty seat beside her. He curled his perfect soft lips upward, opened them, introduced himself, and extended his hand into hers.

His hand felt soft and warm in hers. It was a handshake that seemed to promise something, something she had never had. His deep friendly voice and his outgoing nature made conversation flow without the annoyance of awkward hesitations. She knew he was too old for her, he was twenty-one, she was sixteen, but that meant little to her. He told her that he lived close to her town, about thirty minutes away. When he asked for her phone number, she gladly gave it to him. He promised to call. They created their own world; it was just he and she, flying above everything, until time would carry them down.

As they talked, her affection for him grew. He made her laugh. He joked around with her, telling her that he had just killed someone and that he was wanted by the police. Her lips parted in a delighted smile, and he replied with a short laugh of pleasure. He playfully told her about what he did, and how he was serious that the police were after him. She knew he was joking, she knew him. His smile melted into hers, and the flight was over.

He took her leopard print bags out of the overhead storage and handed them to her. They hugged and said goodbye. He looked into her hazel eyes, shimmering with certainty, and he promised to call. She walked out of the plane, head held high, to go find and retrieve the rest of her luggage. Then, she caught his eyes again. Only this



time, a surge of alarm and trepidation pulsed through her body. She watched as two silver linked bracelets were being placed around his wrists. He calmly stood, his head turned toward her, his eyes on hers, as two police officers escorted him out of her sight. For a few moments she stood, shocked and broken from what she had just seen. When she felt her breaths slow down, she retrieved her luggage and walked herself out.

~Valerie Zelonis

...and a pair of mittens!

Confused by the fairy tales I loved, I once asked, "Daddy, are we rich or poor?" The answer, "In the middle." I liked that, liked being "in the middle" along with everyone else, for I knew no one with the riches of storybook kings or the poverty of Hansel and Gretel, until one January.

Christmas had been the usual magical time. A tree, decorations, new toys and books. So it was with sadness that my friend, Cookie, and I trudged over snow-packed sidewalks toward the reality of our neighborhood school. Ahead was the big white house where Jenna, the new girl, lived. I liked Jenna, but secretly envied her for having brothers and sisters.

Usually, Jenna would come bounding out and fall into step with us. Sometimes we didn't see her at all. This morning was different. Jenna was already waiting at the edge of the walk, excitedly hopping from one foot to the other. As she joined us, Jenna's face glowed with the news she could contain no longer.

"I got THREE presents for Christmas!" she announced. We stopped. Stunned, Cookie and I just looked at each other. Her eyes shining, Jenna held up three fingers and counted off. The first two I don't remember, but they were perfectly acceptable gifts, maybe a storybook and a board game. The third I'll never forget: "...and a pair of mittens!"

My childish mind did somersaults. Only three presents? And one of them a pair of mittens? Clothes you need anyway? And she's so happy?

For years afterward, the word "poor" conjured up the image of a little girl ecstatic over three presents for Christmas, one of them a pair of mittens. Now I know differently. Jenna was not poor. She was not even "in the middle." Jenna was one of the truly rich; one who found joy in whatever she had.

~Phyllis Kendall

## Moving On

Life really is just a series of moments. Or, moreover, a series of feelings. Isolated flashes, pieces of the bad and the good that flash before your eyes, twinkling in the dark like fireflies and dying out again, leaving no sign of their passing, and only an empty feeling behind.

Think about it. That is where our best memories lie, buried just deep enough in the details that you rarely get to fully appreciate them. They're comprised of all senses, but most often the sixth. That sixth sense is no telepathy, no great mystery possessed only by \$5 per minute 900-number psychics, but it is the sixth sense that makes us human. If we have a soul, it is the closest we will ever come to understanding it. It is a piece of a story, activated by a smell or a taste or, often, nothing at all. It is not a physical sense, but a single bright moment when every ounce of perception focuses on something, something so bright that for just an instant, it blocks out all the drudgery of life between these moments and the stories that create them.

I remember something in the air, a certain feeling that defies description but at the same time easily can be identified. Closing my eyes, I can see the way the sun glinted off the pristine green paint of a friend's brand new Mustang as we sped through New York, the last rays of the dying sun glinting off the ocean as we sped over the Brooklyn bridge. The top down, the breeze just cool enough to keep from sticking to the leather seats in the warm summer air, and most of all that wonderful feeling of just leaving it all behind. It was something we did on a moment's notice, just because we could. Could do it again, in another car, at another age, but it just wouldn't be the same. The reality of the story, ironically enough, is nowhere near as beautiful as I remember this single moment. It wasn't even a perfectly captured, Kodak moment of joy among friends. More accurately, I remember looking out across that water and just sort of drifting away from the car, from life, from the whole world. It felt like I could see forever, a myriad of little pinpricks below twinkling, illuminating a tiny little piece of countless lives. Perhaps behind the window lit by one of those little beacons, an old man is looking back out, thinking similar thoughts and remembering, with a tired sigh, some similar such moment from his youth in a world in a time so different I can barely imagine it. There he sits, I imagine, letting moments like these flash past, wishing only for just one chance to make more.

I also remember dying for awhile, and waking up. I remember my wish to live in the moment, in such feelings of paradise forever, so I nobly took up the cause of giving up, and called it rebellion. Nothing to lose, I thought. Everything is left behind, and I will always be free, I thought. Everything did disappear in a pleasant haze of dead-end jobs and apartment buildings and peeling plaster for a time, but looking back I can



only think of how I never truly smiled. The living dead walked through my front door, injecting into their veins a thing at once so hideous that the air around me would darken with its ominous presence. And yet I also remember not noticing.

These people were dead. Hollow husks of humans left behind after something beautiful that was once inside escaped. Every day, they would go out and desperately search for their chance to die all over again, and spend what must seem like eternity wandering, a shell serving little more purpose than a gravestone marking the resting place of a thousand missed opportunities and wasted chances. I've lost track of the number of people I've seen die, and not one of their hearts has yet stopped.

My moment wasn't there. Thank everything that cynicism hasn't managed to impoverish my human spirit. The sun rises brighter each and every morning as, for the first time in my life, I am truly free. Free to appreciate, free to sense, free to understand, and free to move on, but never so free as not to check the rearview to see all the sunsets and shiny paint jobs and smiling faces I'm speeding away from, far faster than I must admit I'd like to be.

~Nathan Jones

## Hakuna Matata

1. Kyle Kane was sitting in his boss's office. Kyle had just gotten a call from the editor of the newspaper and he was waiting for him to show up. Kyle started to drum his fingers on the desk. He closed his eyes and started singing a favorite song of his. *Hakuna Matata* from the movie *The Lion King*. About halfway into the third verse he opened his eyes and sitting in front of him was none other than his editor, Zeke Robertson. Kyle coughed and sat up. "Err. So...What can I do ya for, Zeke."

"*Hakuna Matata?*"

"It's a good song."

"It's a song, I'll give you that."

"Okay, why don't you just tell me what you wanted me for."

"You're fired."

"What!"

"Sorry. Your last few articles have been really bad."

"What? No, they weren't. Sure, they were a little weak but..."

"Weak! Your last article was one-thousand words on how corrupt the UN is."

"That's great investigative reporting. Pulitzer, here I come."

"You had no evidence, though. It was just a bunch of rambling. It read like a manifesto."

"...Damn UN ...Okay, one bad article."

"One? What about when you went undercover as a dog to find out the reason they hate cats so much...I mean, you just walked around the city in a dog costume."

"Okay that wasn't my finest hour."

"You did it for a week!"

"Okay that wasn't my finest week...Give me one more chance."

Zeke sat back in his chair and sighed. "Okay. One more chance, Kyle. Get me a thousand words by next week and, if it's good, you can stay."

2. Kyle sat in his large but lonely apartment. He was trying to think of something to write. Something so big he would be able to keep his job. Kyle continued to think and sit, but mostly sit. While he sat he heard a scream. It was a common occurrence though. Kyle lived next to an insane asylum and screams were a common background noise. But this scream gave him an idea. A most fantabulous, magnificent idea! He would admit himself into the asylum under an assumed name, and he would write how the patients were treated. Kyle hoped they were treated badly because that would make for a great read, and if they weren't he could always lie.

3. Kyle Kane walked into the Bedlam Asylum all ready for his big story. He walked to the receptionist and said that he wanted to admit himself for a few days. The receptionist just stared at him. She spoke. "You want to admit yourself?"

"Yes," Kyle responded. "Is that a problem?"

"It might be. I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but I think you have to be crazy to be in here."

"I don't think 'crazy' is the proper term."

"Oh, really? Do I tell you how to talk?"

"Sorry. But to answer your question: yes, I'm crazy."

"You are?"

"Quite."

"Wow, you seem normal."

"Well, I'm not."

"Well, you do look a little weird."

"What? I mean, yeah...this is what crazy people look like."

"Are you sure you're really crazy?"

Sigh. "Yes...have you ever heard of Hannibal Lecter?"

"That character in those books?"

"Yeah, him. I'm like him."

"You're a cannibal?!"

"What? No. Wasn't Hannibal Lecter just a little schizophrenic?"

"No, he ate people."

"Oh, my. Well, I'm just a little schizophrenic."

"Only a little?"

"Yeah, just a bit."

"Well, okay. What's your name."

"Name...mmm, I didn't think this all the way through..."

"What?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry I was just talking to myself. My name is...my name is...Xavier T. McCool."

4. Kyle Kane, aka Xavier T. McCool, sat in his padded room with a straight jacket tightly fastened around him. This was not what he expected. He yelled out.

"Nurse! Nurse!"

After about forty-five minutes of yelling a nurse came. "What can I do for you, Mr. McCool?"

"I would like a typewriter, please."

"And I want a shot of vodka, but it's not gonna happen."

"But...", sigh, "Can I have a pen and some paper, at least?"

"Well, I might be able to get you a soft-tip marker and....maybe some round paper. You can't have edges, ya know."

"That would be just lovely. What about this straight jacket?"

"What? Do you need it tightened?"

"No, I would like it taken off."

"Oh, you'll have to talk to the doctor about that."

"Okay, can you get me the doctor?"

"Sure."

About three hours later a middle-aged doctor with wire-framed glasses accompanied by two burly orderlies came to Kyle's door. They unlocked it and the two orderlies quickly grabbed Kyle by the shoulders.

"What's this about?" Kyle screamed.

"It's common procedure Mr. McCool. I don't want you crazy people attacking me while we talk."

"I really don't think 'crazy' is the proper term."

"Do you want something Mr. McCool?"

"Yeah, Doc. Can WE get this straight-jacket off?"

"We? Are there other people in here with you, Xavier?"

"What? No, I meant the proverbial 'we'. You know, me and you."

"Mmmmm. I see, and is this 'we' fellow here often?"

"What? No, I don't think you understand me, Doc. I didn't mean another person...I just..." Sigh. "Okay. Yes, this 'we' fellow is always here. Can YOU get this straight-jacket off me now."

"I suppose we could, but I'll want to examine you later and maybe we'll be able to stop these 'we' people from coming to see you."

"Thanks, Doc."

5. Kyle Kane sat with other patients while he ate breakfast. The nurse was kind enough to bring him his writing supplies the night before, so he was busily writing his article while also eating a bowl of Lucky-Charms. A small, squirrely looking guy started poking Kyle in the arm.

"What are you doing, Stevie?"

Stevie spoke with a big dumb voice. "Whu? Nuthin', Mr. McCool. Er. Huh. Ah. Er."

"Stop poking me, Stevie! I'm trying to do something."

Stevie stopped poking and started to cry. This got about a dozen other patients crying too. While Kyle was trying to stop them another patient reached over to Kyle's bowl and started to pick out all the green clover marshmallows.



"What the Hell are you doing, you little freak?" Kyle yelled.

"John likes marshmallows. Yes, I do."

"Well, John, those are my damned marshmallows, and I'll thank you for not putting your damned fingers in my damned bowl."

The doctor with wire-framed glasses ran over to all the yelling and crying. He looked at Kyle. "What are you doing, Xavier? Are you and 'We' causing all this trouble?"

"What? No!"

"I think you better come with me." The doctor made a hand gesture and two orderlies came and dragged Kyle away: his papers and cereal were thrown all over the cafeteria in the brief struggle.

6. Kyle was strapped to a table in a small operating room. Another man was also strapped to a table about ten feet away. The doctor spoke. "We'll keep you here until we can get you a therapist to talk to. Hopefully we will be able to stop all your crazy behavior." The doctor and the orderlies left. Kyle yelled out. "I don't think 'crazy' is the proper nomenclature!" But no one heard.

While Kyle rested he thought he heard some mumbling. Kyle's head was strapped down so he couldn't see anyone. He thought he was just hearing things and decided to sleep until the therapist came. What he didn't know was that John and Stevie had sneaked into the operating room and changed Kyle's and the other man's medical charts.

7. Kyle awoke and felt very strange. He wasn't himself. He felt a pain in his head. The doctor with wire-framed glasses loomed over him. "Mr. McCool. I have some terrible news. It seems that you and your roommate over there had your charts mixed up. So you got his treatment and he got yours. He got the therapy and you got...well...a lobotomy. The hospital is very sorry and if we could reattach your frontal lobe we would... but, well...we can't."

Kyle couldn't think and he didn't try. He knew the doctor was talking but he didn't care. He was more fascinated with a shiny metal object on the ceiling.

8. Kyle decided to stay at the lovely Bedlam facilities. Since he was signed up under an assumed name no one ever found him. Sure, his family and friends looked, but, since they didn't like him much, they gave up fairly soon. It wasn't a big loss, though. Kyle Kane, aka Xavier T. McCool, was quite happy sitting in his padded cell with his shiny tin-foil and box of Lucky-Charms. And if you ever walk by the facility late at night you may just hear someone singing *Hakuna Matata*.

I Understand You, Tennessee  
(Dedicated to Tennessee Williams)

I understand you, Tennessee. I would take your pain. I have known such pain myself. Perhaps I just didn't know its name. You were a poet. You spoke from the soul. But this alone could not assuage your pain. Still, you shared your pain with the many. Your naked, honest pain.. Few have a soul that would share such anguish. Most of us would hide within our pain. Could you only share your pent-up pain on the page, in the words of those who never lived?

I do not claim to know you. But I hope to understand you. We did not speak. We did not meet. We only shared the earth for a few scant years. But I know your soul. You shared it with your words. Your words swept past the span of the ages. Your characters cut deep into my soul.

After a time, the pain overcame you. Your voice seemed tepid, dull, and vague. Or so *they* said. Those who abandoned you. I would not abandon you. I am late. My life is not yours. But I would not abandon you. I understand you, Tennessee. I understand you.

~Matthew Richardson

The bounding of rivers,  
the slow pulse of streams,  
the crumpled orange fragments of  
mushrooms along the rainy woodspath,  
broken and strewn by the hidden feet of  
deer, the sly paws of russet foxes.  
Bright yellow paint, dotted and striped and  
slashed against the dull gnarled tree trunks;  
marking the trail. The chill promise of frosted grass,  
berries like red ornaments, the hunched shoulders of  
lichen-cloaked stone walls, slouching away deeper  
into the trees, obscured by distance.  
Mist hanging low over water, like breath suspended  
in reluctant speech.

~Shannon Hard

## Tired I...

Tired I, and curled against you in the cramped spaces that are afforded to tawdry bits of behavior such as this, the covert cuddling of an acquaintance; this thing that doesn't make me want to, want to fall, certainly not fall in love, not with you, anyhow; but I am left alone too much.

"Come here and sit and sit with me in the cold grass, the wet fields. Too wide these spaces too desperate the moon and too narrow the roads that lead in and out of these situations. It's all too quiet, and even the owls have stopped moving, and the absence is louder than the presence. I can hear the air not moving, as if it has sat still specifically, for me, for this, as though it is waiting. Everything is paused, right in the middle, paused, poised, waiting and the universe is holding its collective breath. How weighty this all seems. The amount of gravity this is imbued with is nearly fatal. Is everything still because some great right is about to happen, or because I am on the brink of a tremendous wrong, which will set everything to crashing down?

Did I ever tell you about the one true hallucination I had? I was entirely in my right mind, had not taken any drug, was not overstressed or overtired. I was alert and walking home from the house just down the road from here. It was nearly spring or nearly winter, and all of the trees were entirely bare. The night was positively arctic, and the dirt road was frozen with ruts and wheel tracks. I had just rounded the corner, where the dirt gives way to pavement, just past the farm. The moon was unbelievably bright, casting that luminous blue over the whole world. I was just starting to walk down the hill, jingling the cold coins in my pocket, when I stopped. There, exactly in front of me, about three steps away, was a majestic white horse. It stood absolutely still. My heart did a neat trapeze act, which it has not been able to duplicate since. I looked at the horse, which was a mass of smooth white muscle, unfathomably deep eyes, and delicate flaring nostrils. Its mane cascaded over the strong column of its neck. Like a horse carved out of pearl, alabaster, meerschaum, and looking straight at me. Steam plumed from its muzzle. I walked forward, haltingly, my mind hysterically repeating, 'Just walk. It's not real. It cannot be real. Where would you find a white horse, at this hour of the night? Especially one that tall, that smooth-looking, that clean. It can't be real.' I wanted to approach it slowly, to touch the mane, to run a cold hand over its rippling hide, to lift its foot and examine the hoof. I wanted to ride. If I was listening to the litany of doubt, if I didn't believe it was real, I certainly wanted to see how durable this hallucination was. If it were real, it would only confirm that I wasn't losing my mind. Losing my mind wouldn't be such a problem, as long as it didn't creep away slowly. I wanted to go gloriously insane, all at once. Never mind the pernicious dementia of old age. I wanted grand delusions and gorgeous mirages like this. Right now.



I walked forward, each step seeming to last, to stretch out. I extended a hand towards the horse, and it disappeared. So there I was, standing frozen in the moonlight in the middle of the road, one hand out, and a disappointed look on my face. I put my hand back into the marginal warmth of my pocket, looked at the ground where the horse had stood, and walked on.

I thought about it the whole way home. Is there any significance to seeing a white horse? Why am I asking you, anyhow, since you would surely tell me whatever you thought I wanted to hear?"

"Sugar," he says, "you are just about the craziest person I've ever met."

"I don't believe you've met enough people for that to become an insult."

"Well, I'd have to admit you're right, on that point."

"Why don't you say something? It's your turn to talk."

"Talk? Talk... that's all we do, sit here and ruin ourselves, betray ourselves, with conversation. I don't need to talk. You don't either. However, since you expect it of me, and I am powerless to disappoint you, I will. I'm going to tell you that the shape of the moon through the kitchen window damn near broke my heart. I will tell you that when I saw this world spread out under the night, I had to get out of the house. Like a jail it was, and I had to do some walking.

"I opened the door onto the porch, and the midnight cats were on the table out there. I said "Hey, kitty," and the tiger-striped one dropped down and wrapped itself around my ankle. The other just sat there and stared. I picked the tiger cat up and patted him a couple of times, looking out through the vines. I saw the world all lit up and waiting, like how a carnival looks from far off. I put the cat down and continued down the nearly rotten wood steps, patched and painted several different colors. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I came to realize how I love the mealy grinding of sand under a boot-heel, especially when the pavement is somewhat damp from a recent rain. I walked along the granite curbing, balancing with my arms like a child, and whistled something that was quickly lost in this thin atmosphere. When I came to the end of the road, I turned left, and the shadows thickened. Somebody's wind chimes began their languid evening dance, filling the air, filling my head with the perilous music of metal triangles colliding together."

"Is that all?"

"No, impatient friend, it is not. Hush yourself and allow me to finish. When I had returned from my wandering, I went back into the house and got that blanket--you know the one--with the yellow background and white polka dots. I took it out onto the side yard and spread it on the grass. I lay on that blanket and looked up. I saw the spider web of the clothesline strung against the sky. I saw the narrow black skeletons of the neighbors' antennae on their roofs; I saw the shivering leaves on the maples, fluttering

all together, like a flock of nervous birds. I was looking at this round world, when everyone else was asleep. I got to see and hear things that nobody else did. I heard the dying squeaks of mice and moles when the cats put an abrupt end to their lives. Lightning bugs, sleeping flowers, shooting stars, wind chimes, meandering skunks, the trickling sounds of springs, the soft air. I can't imagine sleeping and missing this. It's painful to me that I have to sleep at all. It's so goddamned beautiful, all of it. I love the morning, when the sun is opening up and unfolding everything. I love the early part of the day when people are just getting things done. Everybody's on his way to something. I watch the cars, and the people walking down the streets carrying boxes, briefcases, backpacks, or nothing at all. The buildings all look like they are on fire in the late afternoon, when they are swimming in that long orange light. Then the day gets cooler and the birds call and the twilight makes me glad to be alive. And night, as I have just attempted to illustrate, is beyond belief."

"I do believe you're the most obsessive person I've ever met."

"Thank you kindly. Now it's your turn again."

"I was up on the hill with God and my mule, each of us eating a pear, waiting for the show to begin. The house next to mine is inhabited by a lady who grows progressively more insane with each passing day. This is the show I am referring to."

Up until I was about fifteen, that house was occupied by a sweet person in her mid-eighties. She died, unfortunately, and this woman moved in. At first she seemed nice enough. Within the first week of her residing next door, I asked her over for coffee. This little meeting passed uneventfully, without the manifestation of any strange behaviors. She did say a few odd things, but I ignored them.

"Within the next week, she had arrived at the conclusion that my parents were operating a brothel, and that my brother had murdered her son (who, incidentally, committed suicide long before my brother was born.) She would lean out of her window, holding on to the sill with her birdlike hands; and scream obscenities and threats at us. Her lank black hair would hang in strings in front of her eyes and faintly sway in the breeze."

Here is, verbatim, the first encounter with Crazy Virginia, the neighborhood harridan, as recorded in my journal. Would you like to hear it?"

"I would, although I don't suppose that I have a choice about it."

"From my journal:

*"I like things that tie together," she thought with a dark brown gun in her hand and a black dress on.*

*She sat on the back steps and waited for the storm.*

*An old woman appeared in the white window in front of her, the second floor window.*

*'They run that filthy nightclub together. A place where they have men dance...NAKED! And women, too. So just watch out, Julie...' She shut the window and disappeared. Still the girl waited for her storm.*

*'They made her a prostitute. She told them that I would make a good whore. But after talking with me and being with me for several hours, he realized that I would not.' With that, she vanished behind the fly-raddled glass and grimy white curtains.*

*The girl wondered about the significance of 'being with.'*

*The woman reappeared.*

*'You're a very attractive girl, Julie. Just watch out for him. Bruce has a good side but a very wicked one as well.'*

*Again she vanished. Who the hell was Bruce?*

*'They started my daughter out as a go-go dancer. Then he put her in a brothel. Then he brought her out to Vermont. Burlington. A big white Georgian house, with an Oriental restaurant across the way.'*

*The woman disappeared and the storm broke. The girl with the gun went inside.*

*She decorated every window in the house with empty wine bottles, and would often accuse my brother and me of stealing them. By now, my name had become Julie, at least to her, and I had been transformed (in her mind) into the Madame of the brothel!*

*She would become strangely coy at times. My brother and I would be out in the yard and we would hear a faint, insistent tapping. Looking up, we would see her at the window and as soon as we looked at her, she would wrench the curtain shut and turn her head as far to the side as she possibly could, as though we had offended her. She would repeat this over and over, never seeming to tire of this bizarre peek-a-boo, even when we stopped looking up. She was well known to the police officers in town, for reporting the disappearance of trivial things, such as the mysterious filching of the tube in the middle of the toilet paper roll. Pork chops went missing, only to return cooked. Eggs disappeared, somehow escaping from their confining shells, and departing, leaving those discarded shells strewn messily about the kitchen. Also, according to her, a red car had driven down her driveway, and the occupants had shot a red laser beam directly into her bellybutton. She was constantly assailed by FBI agents, aliens, and neighborhood children. She also would lock herself out of the house and have to call the fire department for assistance. However, one day she begged us to call the fire department for her, as she was locked out, and as soon as we did so, she opened the door right up. Upon later inspection, it proved to be one of those doors that only lock from the outside: unless you lose your key, you can't be locked out.*

*As the years went by, she became even less coherent. By the time I was twenty she had taken to appearing on her porch in a half slip and brassiere, holding a mostly empty bottle of wine. I am usually tolerant of other people's quirks, but the sight of this*



withered and sickly old woman in archaic undergarments was just ghastly. At least it was summer, so we didn't have to worry about her freezing to death.

Her surviving son made frequent appearances, to mow the lawn, fix the steps, and do other maintenance work. He never mentioned his mother's behavior, and neither did we. It became something of entertainment value. My friends would come over and we would sit on the back porch, waiting for her to appear like a drunken wraith in the window, brandishing the current bottle and hollering things that resonated with something close to prophecy. She was eerie like that; one day she was screaming at me while I was in the garden. 'Julie, you've got a sore throat, don't you?' That's from (unmentionable activity supposedly taking place in the brothel.) You're getting a cold! I can hear it!' She would say this, without me even speaking to her, and sure enough, I got a cold. Damn strange."

"Yeah. You say this actually happened?"

"It did. I see it as entertaining, and then I feel guilty about enjoying it, because it's really rather sad. I shouldn't delight in other people's miseries and shortcomings."

"But you do."

"Yeah."

"Everyone does, and we are all starlit bones and ankles anyhow, so it really doesn't matter. Enjoy it, Ruthelle, because happiness is short and elusive. If something makes you laugh, and doesn't directly or indirectly cause another being misery, grab it before it gets away and laugh like hell."

"Are we done talking for tonight?"

"Yeah. I better get myself home."

We got up and brushed ourselves off. The east was opening like a pearl and the stars were becoming faint. We each walked our separate ways out of the middle of the field and to our separate houses.

~Shannon Hard



## Emotions

I looked around, and I saw--

The terrible injustices men inflict upon each other,  
The people living in squalor, with no hand held out  
To pull them from their despair,  
And the exchange of hateful words and hurtful blows,  
And tortures too horrible to contemplate  
Between brothers under the skin--

And I wept.

I looked around, and I saw--

Acre upon acre of quilted outpourings of emotion  
And rubble-dusted, tear-streaked faces of anguished helpers  
Whose fingers scrabble through the ruins,  
A small grinning face, the giving of a blossom,  
The looks of compassion and understanding passed  
Between brothers under the skin--

And I hoped.

I looked around, and I saw--

Two long-time enemies shaking hands in a rose garden,  
And people donating time and skills to provide a habitat  
For one less blessed than they,  
The flickering of vigil candles and clasping of hands  
And the collecting of provisions to share  
Between brothers under the skin--

And I smiled.

I looked around, and I saw--

A gathering of voices lifted together in joyous harmony;  
A church supper, where all shared the dishes prepared  
By young and old, dark and light,  
The mixing and mingling of thoughts and ideas  
And vast experiences passed on and on  
Between brothers under the skin--

And I laughed.

~Jeanne Hue

## Streetlight, Stove, Broken Flowers...

Walking across the cement, cracked with cold, and that woman in front of me is trailing perfume, a scent like broken flowers, entirely incongruous with winter—I am thinking of that ancient stove in the basement of Highland Ave, the one that is a brand long gone, Tiger, I believe. When we bought that house, the kitchen floor still showed the marks of where the stove stood for so many years. Now it stands, half concealed in darkness in the basement, alone on that dusty cement floor. During blackouts we would cook on it, and feed the fire with scraps of broken wood, nails jutting like teeth, pieces from chairs smashed in splintery rages, boards from demolished walls and aborted building plans. I miss the old streetlight, casting its sweet petals of real light, white light, somewhat dim around the edges and bright in the middle. It was replaced with one of those awful orange things, the streetlights that look like the smooth heads of poisonous snakes, the kind with the venomous hum, the kind that immediately go dark when you step under them. I remember how that light looked through the shelter of my tree, the maple outside my window. I remember climbing out onto the red roof, the shingles like cat's tongues, under the May moon, the sweet silver rising in the distance over the leafy hill. The hedge, dense poisonous yew, conducive to nightmares, dividing us from our neighbor, ran in a black-green line from our yard to the sidewalk. We had a stained-glass window, a red fleur-de-lis on a clear field of wavy glass, with brown and yellow and red segments as a border. I would always wonder where it came from; if it was rescued or stolen from a church, and why it was in a house built by a Scotsman. Cobwebs in the grass at night, and bees roaming in the daylight, their dizzy buzz hypnotic. We had a garden in our first year there, the year that was reasonably happy, the year before the advent of Hell. We grew cucumbers, strawberries, and pumpkins, by accident. I believe we had flowers, and we planted a cherry tree, which only now has become fruitful. Raspberries grew in teeming wild profusion along the back fence. Snarled vines with ferocious thorns and berries like individual sweet jewels, hot and seeded and visited by bees and birds and squirrels. The cats would weave themselves in and out of the decaying pickets, lithe and striped and seeking. Cats are always looking for something.

The vines that covered the porch were all the progeny of one Dutchman's pipe plant. The leaves were big and heart-shaped, a cool green that rustled in concert with the maple leaves. At night we would set candles on the porch, and sit and watch the moon. Or at least I would. I can remember having many a pointless conversation with my drunken father on that porch, in which I would say something naïve and childish about how he should stop drinking, and he would offer the artless logic that he didn't need to, as it wasn't causing any problems. I knew then that it always causes problems, but it was even more useless to argue that point than anything else. Who needs a daddy when

you've got the moon?

I cannot think of winter at that house; I always see it in summer. I see the mist rising in the morning from the bottom of the hill, obscuring the houses there with curling white tendrils. I hear the evening crickets, and how they wind down towards morning. I don't think that winter came until much later, bringing with it bitterness in tides, waves of chaos, the ugly, complex, and inevitable shattering of a family. I was forced to watch in horror as everything dissolved, as reality proved to be as impermanent and precarious as constructions of beach sand.

The landscape changed in response to these occurrences. The yew hedge, as poisonous as ever, grew wild and tall, a thick unholy evergreen sea. The strawberries and cucumbers were neglected and did not return. The cherry tree stood mute and feeble, still a sapling, its tender foliage devoured early each summer by hordes of rapacious Japanese beetles. The cosmos and daisies and phlox bloomed, but only on the far side of the house, as if eager to dissociate themselves from the difficult mess it had become. Only the raspberries continued to flourish as before, but then, they were wild in the first place.

~Shannon Hard

## Heaven's Little Misfits.

### 1. MAX

My angel passes slowly by, his waist-length brown hair braided tightly down the center of his back between the large pair of black wings that sprout majestically from his shoulder blades, dwarfing his petite, lithesome figure with their size. Blue/violet eyes turn to me, their pupils dancing in merriment as a mischievous grin spreads across his face. A fisted, long fingered hand stretches out toward me, stopping only inches from my face. He opens it to reveal a small green frog sitting peacefully in the center of his palm. The frog and I stare at one another, our eyes sizing up each other. One, two, three blinks and the tiny amphibian has captured my heart. Lightly grasping my comrade's hand, I pull it down and proceed to lay a kiss on the sweet little creature's head, only to find him vanished and my lips touching Max's palm. Slowly my eyes travel up his black-clothed arm, to a slightly bobbing shoulder, up the white, rosy neck, to his smiling jester face.

"Twice in one week, Jordy. You're slipping," tsk's my best friend, enjoying the fact that for the second time this week he has been able to trick me. Now in order to save face I must retaliate, but not here and not now. I'll hold back and drag it out to make it that much sweeter.

'I'll get you, Max, your time will come,' I silently vow, smirking into his hand.



## 2. FEI

After three weeks of plotting to get even against Max for all his pranks pulled, today I can exact my revenge; but before I do that I need to search for Fei, our own little angel of justice, and go over my plan to see if it is a 'fair and honorable' one.

I find Fei sitting on a cloud's edge staring down at the earth. Though he is not the oldest of the Misfits, he is one of the wisest. Should we need answers to questions, we ask him.

"What do you see Fei-chan?" I ask walking up to stand beside the preoccupied angel. I glance over the cloud's edge trying to capture a glimpse of what has my young friend so enthralled. A hand clasps my wrist, causing me to turn and gaze into the wisest pair of eyes I have ever seen. Those eyes so full of wisdom and stories untold search my very being, for what I know not, then with a gentle quirk to his lips accompanied by a curt nod he rises, turning away and leaps off the side, diving into the vast empty air. There: he waits for me, his brown, feathered wings beating to keep him aloft.

"Come, Jordan, I want to show you something," he calls.

"I thought only guardians are allowed to leave heaven," I state.

"I am a guardian, am I not?" asks Fei, his black hair fluttering in the wind.

"Yes, you are, but I'm still in training," I counter.

"You are allowed to leave in the company of a teacher, Jordan, provided there is a lesson to be learned or taught. I am your teacher, and I have a lesson to teach: therefore, you can leave with me," answers Fei, his black eyes shining with excitement.

"Alright," I sigh, leaving the soft comfort of the clouds for the open air.

"I wonder what I'll learn today?" I ask myself as we fly, our destination being the bright blue/green world down below us.

## 3. JORDAN

I find my long-haired angel sitting with Rabar, talking about something I know not about. Thinking of my prank and that I now have an audience to witness my revenge. The smile I wear widens.

Standing a good distance away, I pull out the apple and take a bite, savoring its sweet taste. Closing my eyes, I whisper the words to animate the object held in my hands. As the chant flows, the apple slowly lifts up, leaving my palms empty. At completion, my eyes open to behold my achievement, a winged apple with pink lips flutters mere inches from my face.

"Turn," I command, causing the apple to become inanimate once more and drop back into my waiting hands.

Tucking the fruit away in my pocket, I stride forward, face void of all expression.

"Hello Max, Rabar. How are you two today?"



"Wonderful," pipes up Rabar.

"Great," Max replies. "So, Jordy... where's this 'surprise' I've been hearing about? Rumor has it you've been working on it for weeks," queries the braided one, his smile smug.

"Don't believe everything you hear," I snort. "The only things I have done these past weeks are my lessons and just being free," I answer, which is true for the most part: I was planning my prank during lessons and free time.

Pulling out the apple, I offer it to them, telling them I had picked it up from down below.

"Sure," Max answers as Rabar politely declines my offering.

He reaches out for the ripe fruit, his fingers mere inches from it, when the chant, which is no louder than a soft breath, begins and ends. I watch with barely concealed glee as the violet orbs in front of me enlarge at the sight of the apple growing wings and lips: then, they cross at the sight of it taking to the air, pausing for a moment at the tip of his nose before it kisses said nose. Max loses his balance from this and pinwheels backward to lie spread eagle in the clouds, as we all burst out laughing.

"I'll get you, Jordan," he murmurs, eyes closed and cheeks flushed fiery red.

"Bring it on, Max, bring it on," I whisper, eyes glinting evilly and a sly smirk on my face.

True to his word Max did get even a week later; but then again, so did I.

~Denise Matte





